

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Dam removal in the Toe River Basin

Good morning and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature. This week, we're going to look at steps being taken to help restore the health of a pair of Western North Carolina rivers.

The North Toe River flows through the town of Spruce Pine, in North Carolina's Mitchell County. In town, the river is bordered by riverside park – a city park, with picnic tables and swings, where one can sit and enjoy the river flowing by. The other side of the river is home to downtown Spruce Pine, with its signature parallel main streets. Following the river downstream and out of town, you quickly come to a massive slab of concrete which years ago was a dam.

It's one of two dams in the Toe River Valley slated for removal. The other sits on Yancey County's Cane River, just upstream from Mountain Heritage High School. Both dams once generated power, however, it has been decades since electricity flowed from either one. In fact, the dams have been decrepit for so long, it's impossible to find any records of who they actually belong to.

Though each dam has long since been breached by its respective river and is little more than a mass of concrete in the water, their impacts on the rivers are still felt. The presence of these massive slabs alters the flow of the river and constricts flow so the water rushes through a handful of gaps in the concrete. This inhibits the up and downstream movement of fish and other aquatic organisms, splitting populations and making each portion more susceptible to disappearing. In addition to improving habitat, removing the Toe River dam will also help with the creation of the Toe River Trail – a paddling trail being created across the Toe River Valley.

The dam removal project is spear-headed by the Blue Ridge Resource Conservation and Development Council, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, with the support of Toe River Valley Watch, the local watershed group. Right now, a pair of consulting firms are under hire to examine the best way to actually getting the dam out. There will be no massive explosions sending concrete flying, followed by the rush of free-flowing water. Rather, dam removal will be a very careful and deliberative process, in an effort to keep as much debris out of the river bed as possible and keep the stream banks and beds as stable as possible.

Today the dams are nothing more than concrete ruins, with river water constantly flowing through and around them. The time has long passed for their removal, and today, thanks to a lot of folks in the community who care, they are coming out.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.